



Saskatchewan
Agriculture
and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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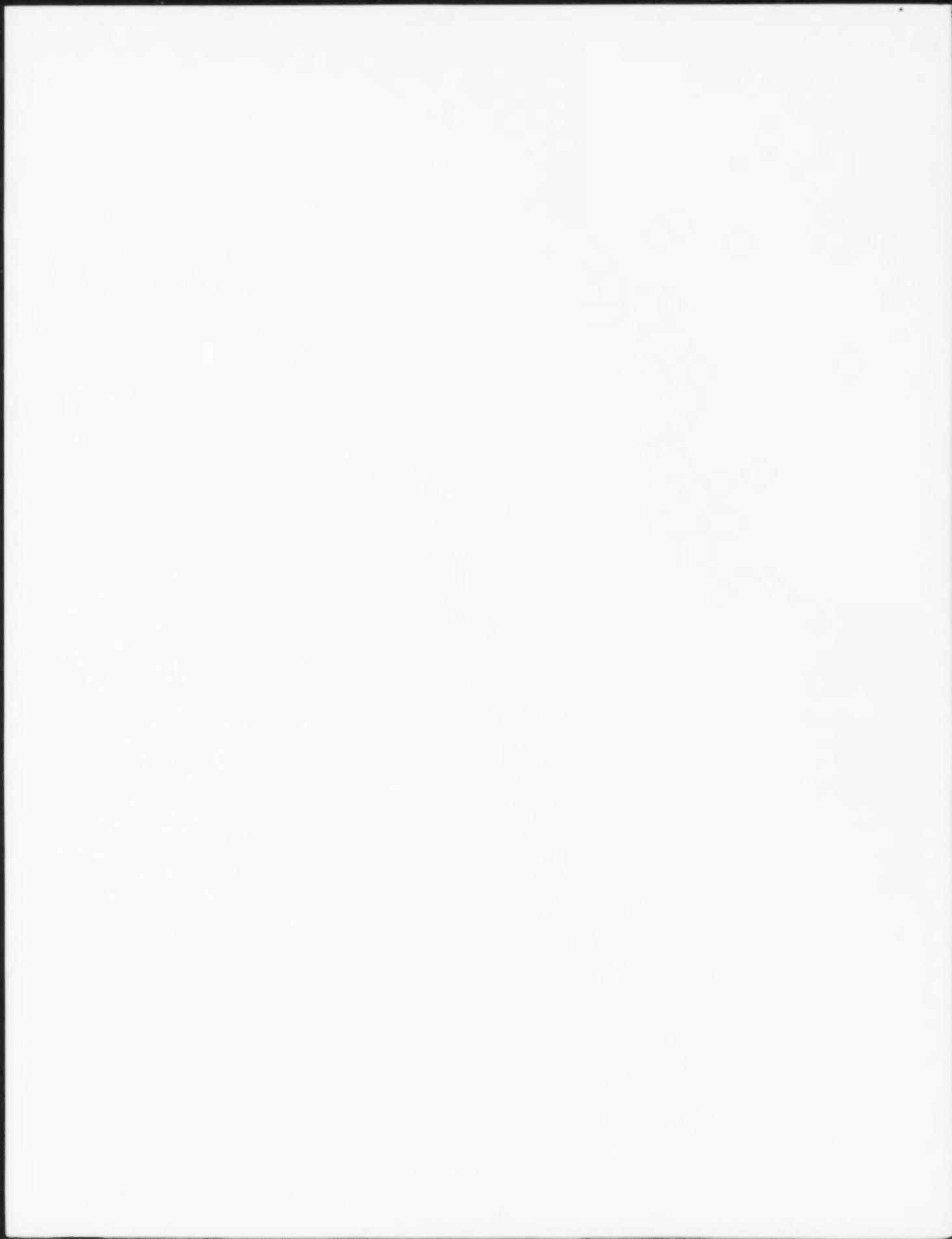
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Log Number: 07-02-06
Week of January 8, 2007

ACAAFS SURPASSES 100-PROJECT MARK IN SASKATCHEWAN

An initiative that helps position Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector at the leading edge of capturing new opportunities has now funded more than 100 projects in Saskatchewan.

The Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food Saskatchewan (ACAAFS) program was launched in April 2004 as a five-year commitment and invests \$3.22 million annually to strengthen the province's agricultural industry.

As of December 2006, a total of 103 projects had been approved for an overall ACAAFS commitment of more than \$5.3 million.

The program is delivered within the province by the Saskatchewan Council for Community Development (SCCD). SCCD Executive Director Laurie Dmytryshyn says that the program has a fairly broad set of criteria so that a wide variety of projects can be considered for ACAAFS funding.

The program has been built around three pillars. Pillar I focuses on industry-led solutions to emerging issues. This includes industry-led projects that test new ideas and approaches. Funding is intended to assist the agriculture and agri-food sector in responding to current and emerging issues, and capturing new opportunities through collaborative projects.

"Under this pillar, we aim to support the development of new ideas, or new value-added products and processes," Dmytryshyn explained. "The intent is to take advantage of opportunities for growth and diversification in areas that are recognized as industry priorities."

Pillar II deals with capturing market opportunities by advancing research results. This pillar assists in creating market opportunities within the agriculture and agri-food sector by transferring research results from industry, government and educational institutions. The goal is to encourage business growth and improve the sector's competitiveness through the commercialization of research results.

"Examples of projects funded here are business plans, marketing plans, feasibility studies, market assessments, engineering work and product prototypes," said Dmytryshyn.

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Pillar III supports sharing information to advance the sector. Funding provided under this pillar is intended to assist the agriculture and agri-food sector in gathering, analyzing and sharing information that will strengthen its ability to participate in the policy dialogue and shape the future of the industry.

"This pillar is more policy-oriented," Dmytryshyn noted. "For example, health and wellness is obviously a priority area, so if there is a policy issue that needs to be addressed through a workshop combining health and agriculture, there may be an opportunity to seek funding assistance."

Sandy Purdy is one of the applicants whose project was approved for ACAAFS funding in 2006. Purdy, the owner and operator of Prairie Berries Inc. in Keeler, received support to develop and test a dried saskatoon berry product that could lead to greater demand in the saskatoon market and increased value-added processing within the province.

Without this kind of program, she feels many smaller entrepreneurs like her might not be able to bring their good ideas to reality. "Without funding from ACAAFS, some of these projects would be out of the reach of small businesses like mine," Purdy said. "We have small cash flows for research and development, and we're just trying to pay the bills and stay alive. So these things wouldn't be possible if ACAAFS didn't exist."

ACAAFS project decisions are made by the SCCD Board of Directors, which meets five times during the year to review applications. There is a separate, fast-tracked process for projects requesting under \$10,000 in funding. "This provides a bit more flexibility for applicants if they've got a smaller project they want to get going on fairly quickly," Dmytryshyn said.

The next ACAAFS application deadline is March 26 for projects seeking more than \$10,000, and February 9 for requests under \$10,000. However, there are additional deadlines throughout the year where projects can be submitted for consideration.

Groups or individuals interested in learning more about ACAAFS or obtaining an application package can visit the programs section on the SCCD website at www.sccd.sk.ca/acaafs, or contact the SCCD at (306) 975-6849.

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PRAIRIE CHERRYTM DRIVES BUSINESS FOR LUMSDEN FRUIT GROWERS

It's a short drive from Regina to Lumsden, but it was a long journey for Dean and Sylvia Kreutzer from city dwellers to organic fruit growers. In the six years since they made the leap, they've planted 25 acres of fruit trees, begun producing various fruit-based products, and have just opened a dessert bar to go with their store in Lumsden.

Dean was a computer programmer by training and experience, when his backyard fruit tree growing inspired him to begin studying plant breeding, and finally to become a full-time fruit producer.

"It's four years from the day you plant a tree until your first harvest, so you have lots of time to plan," he said. "We made the important decision to be not just growers, but also processors and sellers of the finished product."

Among the 3,000 fruit trees in the Kreutzers' Over The Hill Orchards near Lumsden, you'll find apples, apricots, grapes and plums – but their signature product is the Prairie CherryTM. Dean says this hardy fruit is the product of over 60 years of research at the University of Saskatchewan to create a variety that was suited for Saskatchewan growing conditions.

"It's a tart cherry, with more natural sugars than the B.C. varieties, and a higher acidic content, which creates a full flavour," he noted. "The fruit retains its colour very well, and does not require much sugar added during processing."

The Prairie CherryTM is at the heart of the Kreutzers' most popular product, handmade chocolates with a cherry centre, all made without any artificial additives or preservatives. Natural flavour and colour is important to Dean and Sylvia, who grow all of their fruit using organic farming methods.

"Our fruit must taste good, as well as being healthy," Dean said. "Most of our customers come to us for the flavour. The fact that we grow organically is secondary."

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Their fruit products, including pie fillings and jams, are currently distributed through stores in Regina, Saskatoon, Yorkton, Prince Albert, Moose Jaw and Fort Qu'Appelle. They have filled e-mail orders from as far away as British Columbia and Prince Edward Island, but Dean says they won't look at expanding markets until they can keep up with Saskatchewan demand. He estimates that there may be up to 100 Prairie Cherry™ growers in Saskatchewan, but only a handful with enough harvest to operate commercially.

The Kreutzer family operation employs three people full-time at the Lumsden store, Prairie Cherry Corner, where they just opened a dessert bar that serves organic coffee. Dean says the biggest challenges of growing fruit in Saskatchewan are weather, markets and capital. However, he is proud of what their operation has done to show the potential diversity that exists for food production in the province.

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SOIL BIOLOGICAL PROCESSES RESEARCH TRULY A TEAM EFFORT

The University of Saskatchewan Department of Soil Sciences research chair for Soil Biological Processes, funded by Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF), differs from most other SAF research chairs: it is occupied by two people.

Doctors Richard Farrell and Diane Knight are both soil biology specialists by training and experience. They are "job sharing" the research chair position.

"We overlap on projects that we do together, but we have separate projects as well," Dr. Farrell said. "Our background and interests split along certain lines, and we just follow those."

Their collaboration doesn't end there, though. It extends to home and family, as the Ph.D soil scientists are also husband and wife.

They met at the U of S when Farrell, a native of Rhode Island, came to the university for post-doctoral studies. After a brief sojourn back to the U.S., they returned to Dr. Knight's home, Saskatchewan, to raise a family.

The mandate assigned to their SAF chair position is to conduct research on the soil-plant relationship, focusing on biological processes and inputs that will enhance environmental and economic sustainability of soil resources.

One of their projects that is in the final stages of reporting involves "phyto-remediation" of old gas flare pits on oil and gas drilling sites in Saskatchewan.

"It's an effort to develop and understand the agronomy of getting plants to grow in contaminated land, to actually reduce the contamination and restore the soil to an agriculturally-useful endpoint," Dr. Farrell said.

Their test site has been a now-closed oil well near Carlyle. Prior to environmental regulation, flare pits not only burned off excess gas at ground level, but were also used as oil and chemical dumping grounds.

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Dr. Farrell's work starts after contaminated topsoil is removed, and various grasses are planted to bring the remaining soil back to life.

"The producer whose field (the Carlyle site) sits in said he never thought he'd see anything green grow in it again," he said. "Today, that site is covered in healthy grasses, and the owner, Talisman Energy, is using it as a demonstration for staff."

Environment Canada estimates there may be 100,000 such sites in Saskatchewan and Alberta, each of which is two to four acres in size, meaning a great deal of land can be reclaimed for production.

Doctors Farrell and Knight have also reported on greenhouse gas emissions resulting from the use of nitrogen fertilizer. It is known that some percentage of the fertilizer returns to the atmosphere as nitrous oxide, one of the greenhouse gases. However, their work indicates that conventional standards applied to the gas emission were developed in U.S. farming areas that are much higher in moisture and use much heavier fertilizer application than is typical on the prairies.

"We were always arguing that the results weren't really applicable to Saskatchewan, nor to the prairies in general," said Dr. Farrell.

Indeed, their research has found that the gas released from Saskatchewan fields is only about half the amount commonly found in the American studies, which will impact on any future federal standards developed for these emissions.

Looking ahead, the Soil Biological Processes program will be continuing its work on organic farming systems, use of inoculants to increase nutrient cycling in alfalfa, and the impact of changing no-till land to intermittent till.

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NEW PROJECT AIMS TO HELP SUSTAIN SPECIES AT RISK

The Canadian prairies are home to some of the most incredible and unique species of plants and animals. Unfortunately, some of these species exist in numbers so low they are considered to be in danger of disappearing.

However, thanks to the co-operative efforts of several agencies, a new project is being launched across Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba to help sustain these species-at-risk by identifying and promoting beneficial agricultural management practices that will help to keep them safe and sound into the future.

According to Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) Forage Development Specialist for Ecological Services Dale Weisbrot, the "Species at Risk Beneficial Management Practices" project has two primary intents:

- to develop producer-friendly information packages describing beneficial agricultural management practices for prairie species-at-risk specific to eco-regions and habitat types; and
- to provide technical support to appropriate extension and program delivery agencies to support implementation of beneficial management practices by agricultural producers and land managers.

"The project's goal is to review current agricultural practices and their impacts – positive, negative and neutral – on Canadian prairie species-at-risk," Weisbrot said. "That information will then be used to identify beneficial management practices that leverage positive impacts and mitigate negative impacts on these species in each eco-region."

The project is being funded primarily through the Greencover Canada Program, a Government of Canada initiative to help producers improve land management practices, protect water quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and enhance biodiversity and wildlife habitat. It is directed and supported by a partnership that includes Environment Canada, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, Alberta Fish and Wildlife, and Manitoba Conservation. Numerous other partner organizations across the prairies are providing technical advice to the project, and plan to assist in disseminating the resulting information to producers.

Sue Michalsky, a rancher from Eastend, is the Project Manager co-ordinating the consultation and overseeing the reviews and reference material design. Michalsky says that consultation will play a big part in the success of this initiative. She indicated that representatives of the federal and provincial

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agencies involved in species-at-risk issues plan to work with producers and species experts to develop consensus and craft technical information on best management practices.

"The project team is currently seeking producers or other land managers who actively manage for a species-at-risk on their land to act as advisors to the project," Michalsky noted. "Fortunately, the project has generated a great deal of interest within the agricultural sector, and many individual members of partner organizations have become engaged in providing technical assistance."

The development of beneficial management practices as they pertain to agriculture will be guided by a number of principles. The practices will:

1. be species-based, ecologically driven in a landscape context;
2. be measurable, based on the best available science and knowledge;
3. encourage stewardship and a co-operative approach that is relevant to producers;
4. be context driven, adaptive to the needs of the species, and flexible;
5. be targeted to species-at-risk, and not wildlife or species generally;
6. consider socioeconomic constraints for producers;
7. consider compliance and regulatory issues; and
8. consider technology transfer applicability.

Once developed, the beneficial management practices will be recommended and promoted to producers and other important stakeholders, whose activities can have considerable impact on the environments of the various species-at-risk. Current land management practices having a negative impact on species at risk will also be identified so that beneficial management practices can be developed to replace them.

The information will also be freely available to government departments, producer groups or NGOs that may be able to help implement the results. Federal and provincial agencies, for example, could incorporate the beneficial management practices and products into their technology transfer initiatives. The information could similarly be provided to help various authorities responsible for environmental assessment and regulatory review in identifying potential mitigation methods.

A Stakeholder Consultation Workshop is planned for January 24 and 25 at the Cypress Hills Provincial Park in Saskatchewan. The workshop will facilitate the provision of feedback by key stakeholders from the prairies on how the beneficial management practice deliverables can be made more meaningful and effective. Any individuals interested in this initiative are invited to participate in the project.

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PULSE WORKSHOPS OFFER PRODUCERS A CHANCE TO EXPAND HORIZONS

The upcoming Regional Pulse Development Workshops are the place to be for any producers currently growing pulse crops, or those considering branching into the market.

The workshops are being held in three locations – Swift Current on January 30, Moose Jaw on January 31, and Weyburn on February 1.

Saskatchewan Pulse Growers (SPG) Communications Manager Erin Athmer says the conferences are scheduled for the southern part of the province because that's where the greatest interest has been in the pulse workshops, as they provide information for those producers who live further away from Saskatoon, where Pulse Days are held during Crop Production Week.

According to Athmer, the three main pulse crops produced in Saskatchewan are peas, lentils and chickpeas, with dry beans and faba beans also gaining ground.

Athmer says the advantages pulse crops offer should interest all Saskatchewan producers.

"Pulses should be included in every farmer's rotation, because they fix their own nitrogen," she said. "As a result, when you have pulses in your rotation, your fertilizer requirements are reduced – and nitrogen costs have been going up and up. There are also many great environmental benefits to growing pulse crops. So all in all, they offer a fantastic alternative for producers to consider."

Athmer says the regional workshops offer "a little bit of everything" for producers currently growing pulse crops or those thinking about getting into the industry. There are sessions on market outlook, new herbicide and pesticide registrations, new pulse crop varieties, pulse diseases, agronomy research results, and global drivers impacting Saskatchewan agriculture.

"Our general theme for these seminars focuses on increasing profitability for our farmers," Athmer noted. "We try to provide them with the latest research findings that are going to help them make the most of pulse market opportunities. We try to give them the information and the tools they need so that they can make the right decisions for their operations."

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The program also features a session entitled "Your Check-Off Dollars at Work," where SPG directors and staff talk about projects and initiatives the group is working on, and seek feedback from the producers in attendance.

Athmer says that most of the presenters featured at the workshops come from within the province, so that Saskatchewan producers get to hear about research and market perspectives that are most relevant to their operations. This is possible because of the wide range of experts and specialists located in the province with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, and the University of Saskatchewan.

"We have sponsors that attend the workshops, as well," Athmer added. "The sponsors have trade show booths at each location, so it's a chance for producers to spend some time getting additional information."

Registration for the workshops is \$15 per person, including lunch and all coffee breaks. "We know it's been a tight year for producers, so we've kept the fee the same as last year," Athmer said. "Given the amount of information being offered, I think it's a deal that producers will find hard to beat!"

Although registration can be handled at the door, producers are kindly asked to pre-register before January 26 by calling the Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food Agriculture Knowledge Centre at 1-866-457-2377.

More details on the Regional Pulse Development Workshops can be obtained on the SPG website at www.saskpulse.com, or by calling the association at (306) 668-5556.

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